



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/13678779241247286

[journals.sagepub.com/home/ics](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ics)



*Precarious Creative Work*

# The precarities of cultural and creative work through pandemic times

**Anna Cristina Pertierra** 

University of Technology Sydney, Australia

**Ahtziri E. Molina**

Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico

**Bianca Garduño** 

Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Perú

## Abstract

In recent years, we have experienced a renewed public awareness of the importance of creative and cultural work for personal and national wellbeing. Contributors to this special issue turn their attention to the diverse experiences of creative and cultural workers, to understand how creative work has been disrupted, abandoned, transformed or reinvented across distinct cultural and economic contexts. In various circumstances reshaped by the pandemic, creative and cultural workers soon realized that paid work as they knew it would no longer be possible, and they had to quickly recalibrate their breadwinning strategies, in turn affecting their understandings of labour and value. This special issue considers the experiences of workers across Europe, Latin America, Africa and Australia, adding still-needed geographic diversity as part of ongoing efforts in research on creative and cultural work in pandemic times.

---

## Corresponding author:

Anna Cristina Pertierra, Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building, University of Technology Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway, Sydney, New South Wales 2007, Australia.

Email: [AnnaCristina.Pertierra@uts.edu.au](mailto:AnnaCristina.Pertierra@uts.edu.au)

**Keywords**

creative work, cultural institutions, cultural sector, lived experience, pandemic, precarity

In recent years, we have experienced a renewed public awareness of the importance of creative and cultural work for personal and national wellbeing. Media debate and scholarly research gives increasingly consistent shape to a story that has steadily unfolded since the 2020 onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (noting that this pandemic crisis has unfolded alongside other global crises). At precisely the moment in which many citizens turned to the arts and cultural fields seeking solace, entertainment and information during periods of uncertainty and isolation, the very workers whose labour most contributes to such sectors have experienced visibly increased economic precarity. Governments have overlooked opportunities to collaborate with cultural institutions and creative sectors to support creative workers, their institutions and the general public. The limitations of organizational banners such as ‘the creative industries’ have been starkly apparent given the piecemeal and insufficient responses by institutions and industry sectors to the needs of their workers, who are operating across a spectrum of more and less precarious circumstances.

This story – while not completely even or homogeneous – was largely borne out in the first wave of published research on how the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted creative and cultural sectors. Venues associated with the creative arts, such as museums, galleries, and performance spaces, were among those most immediately affected by the forcible and voluntary shutdown of public life (Eltham and Pennington, 2021). One early collection to consider Covid-19 and the cultural sectors, edited by Banks and O’Connor, focused on cultural policy responses and the debates that followed; “as in other periods of great social turbulence, it was art and culture that provided a key site on which these transformations could be registered, digested, and a response found” (Banks and O’Connor, 2021: 15). Early analysis was disproportionately focused on Europe, in part because of the activity of European and United Nations policy agendas (UNESCO, 2020; but see Joffe, 2021 as an early perspective from Africa). While subsequent discussions and case studies have included a wider regional scope, a 2022 systematic literature review of English-language journal publications on the impact of Covid-19 on the creative industries still indicates a strong focus on global North contexts (Khlystova et al., 2022). Key themes identified across that research include analysis of disruptions such as cancellation of events and the economic impact of social distancing and closures; lack of government support; digitization as a response to the pandemic; the role of cultural entrepreneurs and the economy.

While those themes do appear in the work brought together for this special issue, we seek to advance the emerging literature with a particular focus on the lived experiences of creative and cultural workers. We found that earlier research did not deeply explore the small-scale issues and local voices of individuals engaging in creative work. Contributors to this special issue therefore turn their attention to the diverse experiences of creative and cultural workers, to understand how creative work has been disrupted, abandoned, transformed or reinvented across distinct cultural and economic contexts. In various circumstances reshaped by the pandemic, creative and cultural workers soon realized that paid

work as they knew it would no longer be possible, and they had to quickly recalibrate their breadwinning strategies, in turn affecting their understandings of labour and value. This special issue considers the experiences of workers across Europe, Latin America, Africa and Australia, adding still-needed geographic diversity as part of ongoing efforts in research on creative and cultural work, to amplify what Alacovska and Gill (2019) have called ‘ex-centric perspectives’. In Milan and Sydney we meet creative workers in large and wealthy cities, but for whom complex political and economic challenges constrain the possibilities for creative work to flourish. In Scotland, Dundee offers the example of a regional city with a history of economic hardship where the creative industries operate in part as form of urban revitalization. Experiences of workers in Nigeria are different again, as Nollywood has unmistakably built a powerhouse of media production, but in a context largely divorced from government dependency or regulation. Two contributions from Latin America, in Mexico City and Argentina, show the complexities of working in cultural sectors that are highly entangled with state institutions with variable policies and sometimes capricious approaches, while also subjected to the volatilities of unstable economies. The role of the state is different again in Serbia, where thirty years of capitalist market reform have not erased all policy possibilities and artistic approaches developed through socialism.

Despite the obvious differences found across the cities and nations considered in the contributions in this special issue, the reported experiences of cultural and creative workers all showed that their access to both work and income, already precarious, became even more precarious during and after 2020. Before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, analyses of creative and cultural workers already featured a recurring recognition of the precarious nature of most creative work, to the degree that cultural and social research on the so-called precariat regularly considers creative workers as exemplars of precarious work characteristic of the neoliberal globalized age (Banks and O’Connor, 2021; Morgan and Nelligan, 2018; Ross, 2009; Standing, 2011). The creative industries have been known for their resilience and flexibility (Khlystova et al., 2022: 1194–5), but critical scholarship suggests that such terms as ‘resilience’ are euphemisms that cover a level of insecurity and underpayment that might better be termed exploitation. The discourse of creative industries as spaces for resilient and agile labour is prevalent not only in Western and Central Europe, but also in Latin America, where, as Guillermo Quiña (2023) writes in this special issue, workers increasingly embrace an identity as ‘culturepreneurs’. For both individual workers and the institutions that employ them, the growing tendency (or requirement) for creative industries to demonstrate their value through financial return has coexisted in awkward combination with advocating for their existence as public service (Banks and O’Connor, 2021: 5). This awkwardness was made especially apparent with the onset of Covid-19, as reported in the Mexican example provided in this issue by Bianca Garduño Bello, Ahtziri Molina and Anna Cristina Pertierra (2024), wherein federal public institutions called for free labour from creative workers previously working on contracts.

Comunian and England (2020) have observed that the moment of pandemic crisis exposed to a new degree a pre-existing precarity that underlay creative workers’ lives. Following on and expanding upon this observation, our special issue casts our considerations of how work has been experienced in pandemic times through a critical deployment

of the notion of precarity. We acknowledge that precarity has been explored extensively by sociologists, philosophers and cultural studies scholars, for many of whom precarity stands as a condition of heightened significance in late modernity. Precarity has been invoked to a degree that it has been suggested as a concept at risk of losing analytical distinction (Miller, 2017), a term so ubiquitous that it threatens to dissolve when held up to close ethnographic examination (Han, 2018: 332). However, we take seriously our observation that, simultaneously, researchers working across highly different contexts invoke precarity to describe what their research participants have been experiencing in the pandemic period. Creative workers self-identify as precarious now more than before. This rise in reference to precarity highlights that – like similarly overused concepts including poverty and development – precarity is an inherently relative concept. Across different global contexts as established by this issue's contributors, creative and cultural workers find themselves to be more precarious than they were before, and also more precarious than workers in other sectors. We find them more self-aware of their condition and actively disliking it.

In bringing together a geographically diverse set of examples it is increasingly clear that precarious creative work is the norm rather than the exception, with Fordist capitalism a relic of the past in many places – while it was never a model of labour at all in many parts of the world (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). Standing (2011) describes the precariat as a group that has grown out of advanced capitalist economies; they lack labour and employment security, they lack income security but also lack social security and experience a loss of safety net (2011: 12–13). But we start to see more similarities than differences in the forms of work that may be termed as 'entrepreneurial' or 'freelance' in many global North contexts, or 'informal labour' in contexts more often associated with the global South. While informality has historically been a concept linked to development policies which assume informality in emerging economies will eventually be eradicated, the kind of precarious, flexible and self-generated work that is characteristic of informal economies can in fact be found across the world (Castells and Portes, 1989, see also Han, 2018: 332–4). The nature of work in large cities of the global South, enmeshed in globalized commercial markets, is often much more precarious than the livelihoods of agricultural or other regional contexts from which global South informal workers have transitioned. Informality and precarity therefore increasingly look to be the same thing, reached from different points of origin. Godwin Iretomiwa Simon's (2024) contribution to this issue shows an interesting relationship between precarity and informality; in Nollywood's 'born-informal' industry, precarity had not previously been experienced by workers due to plentiful work opportunities. Precarious labour structures were characteristic, but the pandemic brought to the fore challenges for the industry that had previously been hidden. As a result, Nollywood workers increasingly clamour for formalization processes to make employment more secure and build a safety culture on set. In Latin America, where informality is also a characteristic of labour markets in general, and particularly for creative work, Argentina (Quiña, 2023) and Mexico (Garduño Bello et al., 2024) offer examples of formalization processes that fall well short of improving labour and living conditions, but where the pandemic provided a moment in which workers were pushed to organize themselves, when there had previously been little chance of collective agreement.

In this mix of informal and precarious work, a recurring characteristic of creative work noted in existing literature is the way in which creativity enables, encourages or justifies forms of non-monetary labour. Working for free might variously be understood as building a business, pursuing a passion, or being duped and exploited by capitalism, and is often justified as part of a transition or aspiration to paid creative work (Alacovska, 2022: 678). Several contributions to this issue connect the concept of precarity to questions of creativity as more-than-labour; we see how long-standing ideas of passion, vocation and creative talent are understood as simultaneously transcending economic models while being subjected to them. As Alacovska has noted, ‘post-waged work is paradoxically contingent on the same escalating consumerism and formalized market logic which it appears to contradict’ (2022: 687). Here again the shared characteristics of precarious and informal work are evident; the unwaged precarious creative work sits within and depends upon a market system, just as informal work has often been understood as intertwined with formal structures in whose shadows it operates.

In especially precarious times of pandemic, creative and cultural workers have not simply experienced economic hardship. Rather, the multilayered challenges brought on by pandemic effects have generated some new ways of understanding both work and creativity. There are strong moral dimensions of creative work, the importance of which may be expressed or intensified through crisis. As Alacovska has argued, while much existing work on creative labour has framed it as individualist and entrepreneurial labour in the workers’ self-interest, creative work is also understood as a form of care, ‘as a labour of compassion as opposed to a labour of passion’ (2020: 728). Wageless work is common in creative sectors where work is often bartered, swapped, or otherwise undertaken in non-marketized ways (Alacovska, 2022). Emphasizing the care and compassion of creative work is one way to illustrate the non-capitalist possibilities and motivations that offer alternatives to a neoliberal entrepreneurial model. This special issue seeks to contribute to the as yet under-theorized space of the socialized dimensions of creative work. Milan Đorđević and Nina Mihaljinac (in press) offer a model of artistic labour under way in Serbia that centres upon social engagement as an opportunity to move beyond both elite patronage and commercial markets, in an alternative model of progressive cultural action that is enabled by local/municipal community governance. Their case study of the Stara Pazova art project emphasizes horizontal cooperation and close community engagement. Socially engaged work is a core motivation for many of the participants whose experiences inform articles in this issue, with creative workers positioning themselves as filling gaps in care left by failing state institutions. We see examples of government funding responses – however insufficient – in Mexico and Argentina as different authorities came to terms with the increasingly clear effects of closures and social distancing measures upon creative workers. In Scotland, where freelancers make up over 30% of the creative workforce, Lauren England (2023) shows that existing vulnerabilities from freelancing were magnified by cultural institutions themselves. Government policy has started to acknowledge the need to care more systematically for creative workers and the working and living conditions they experience.

Several contributions suggest an emerging subjectivity among creative workers. Opportunities for collective action have arisen through pandemic work experiences

and the networks generated to sustain livelihoods and wellbeing during this time. Our authors present arguments for future organizing of the creative sectors that might improve living conditions for workers. Tamsyn Dent, Roberta Comunian and Jessica Tanghetti (2023) draw from long-standing political histories of disaster and change to frame the experience of cultural workers in Milan, Italy as an interruption; for Dent et al., a sudden encounter with an interruption offers a moment of reflection or awakening. In Argentina, Quiña (2023) shows how problems associated with labour in the creative sectors became more pronounced through the pandemic, which forced governments to address it in new and more explicit ways. In Mexico, Garduño Bello et al. (2024) show that the governmental response actually enhanced precarity due to the very policies promoted in the name of sectoral ‘development’. Another contributor, England (2023), points out that in Scotland, while more resourcing is needed, just as important as economic resources is an institutional commitment to an ethic of care in engagement with their creative workers. Cultural organizations – many of which may espouse an ethos of care and public service in their offerings – must also care for their workers. Although, as Dent et al. warn in reference to Italy, we must be cautious, so that ‘emerging forms or consciousness and/or resistance are not mistaken for actual change’, the experiences of participants across the articles in this special issue suggest pathways and possibilities for a reorganization of creative work in which precarities are no longer so devastating.

These contributions also support a growing understanding, over time, of how pandemic times overlap with wider series of disasters and interruptions; the Covid-19 pandemic is not an aberration but rather an intensified moment of crisis that lies atop multiple other crises both fast and slow. Creative workers’ experiences of pandemic precarity are compounded by multiple factors such as housing crisis (Wolifson et al., 2023), political austerity or anti-corruption campaigns (Garduño Bello et al., 2024), competitive funding landscapes (England, 2023). In their contribution emphasizing the spatial dimensions of creative work during the pandemic, Peta Wolifson and her co-authors (2023) present precarity as ‘co-constituted and experienced differently through matters of employment conditions, urban built environment, and social reproduction’. This co-constitution of precarity with other social, environmental and political factors intensifies the widened disparities and inequalities within and across creative sectors during pandemic times.

We describe the era through which we have been living as *pandemic times* to emphasize that there are not clear boundaries around the beginning and end of this period. Each context considered in our special issue was marked by different timelines of lockdowns, border closures, state support payments and vaccination schedules, and some of these events did have specific start and finish dates. But the pandemic times live on; just as the Covid-19 virus continues to circulate, the lingering impacts of the heightened period of 2020–2022 remain for cultural and creative workers. The medium-term impacts of illness, lockdowns and economic disruption across the creative industries globally are still unfolding. The research brought together in this collection is not merely a snapshot of a specific period of high pandemic: rather, it uses a range of qualitative methods to understand how the role of creative and cultural work in different communities, and how the possibilities and constraints for workers in these sectors, have shifted

across a timeframe of several years to create new settings for the near future. Drawing variously from sociology, labour studies, feminist geography and more, the spatial and temporal elements of the pandemic are a recurring theme: Wolifson et al. (2023) use mapping techniques to understand the interaction of creative workers with creative spaces in Sydney, Australia; England's (2023) contribution provides a productive case study of regionality in Dundee, Scotland; Simon's (2024) participants in Nigeria are returned to for their reflections on how their industry has changed over time, and what changes have stuck two or three years into pandemic times.

Australian arts writer Esther Anatolitis recently observed:

Whether it's another catastrophic fire, widespread flood or global pandemic, major disruptions to our cultural life are our new abnormal. The ways we stand by our artists, create our own culture rather than consuming someone else's content, educate our next generations, and look after one another – these decisions define us. (Anatolitis, 2023)

The intention of this collection is to expand our growing understanding of how pandemic times have defined us, reshaping creative and cultural workers in their diverse social experiences of precarities. While measuring economic impacts and assessing cultural policy responses remain important, understanding the long-term repositioning of cultural and creative work and workers after Covid-19 must be considered through the specificities of lived local contexts. Such specificities, in turn, may suggest how current policy agendas led by UNESCO and regional cultural bodies might be recast by a wider capturing of what it means to do cultural and creative work, or how creative industries may recover financially for future expansion, recognition, formalization, and remuneration. But the lived experiences of creative and cultural workers are important to understand for other reasons too: first, as an ongoing documentation of pandemic times, the voices and experiences of creative workers are worth listening to. Second, the crises and their navigation have pointed to possibilities and opportunities for rethinking what creative work is for, and how it might be pursued through this and other crises in 'the new abnormal'. And, third, we hope that these contributions show how creative work research can function as a call to action; the specificities and power that academics are able to deploy might be a small yet important step to achieving greater recognition and better conditions for this universe of workers.

## Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Australian Research Council (grant number DP190100727).

## ORCID iDs

Anna Cristina Pertierra  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4410-5528>

Bianca Garduño  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2113-1718>

## References

- Alacovska A (2020) From passion to compassion: A caring inquiry into creative work as socially engaged art. *Sociology* 54(4): 727–744.
- Alacovska A (2022) The wageless life of creative workers: Alternative economic practices, communing and consumption work in cultural labour. *Sociology* 56(4): 673–692.
- Alacovska A and Gill R (2019) De-westernizing creative labour studies: The informality of creative work from an ex-centric perspective. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22(2): 195–212.
- Anatolitis E (2023) Shot through the art: How COVID policy jeopardised Australian culture. Crikey. Available at: <https://www.crikey.com.au/2023/09/29/covid-policy-jeopardised-australian-culture/>
- Banks M and O'Connor J (2021) 'A plague upon your howling': Art and culture in the viral emergency. *Cultural Trends* 30(1): 3–18.
- Castells M and Portes A (1989) World underneath: The origins, dynamics, and effects of the informal economy. In: Portes A, Castells M and Benton LA (eds) *The Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 11–37.
- Comunian R and England L (2020) Creative and cultural work without filters: COVID-19 and exposed precarity in the creative economy. *Cultural Trends* 29(2): 112–128.
- Dent T, Tanghetti J and Comunian R (2023) Creative and cultural work post-Covid-19: Interruptions as space of political re-futuring. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/10.1177/13678779231217295>
- Đorđević M and Mihaljinac N (in press). Visual artists' professional and social status: Insights from Serbia, a postsocialist country. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*.
- Eltham B and Pennington A (2021) *Creativity in Crisis: Rebooting Australia's Arts and Entertainment Sector after COVID*. Canberra: The Australia Institute. Available at: <https://australianinstitute.org.au/report/creativity-in-crisis-rebooting-australias-arts-and-entertainment-sector-after-covid/>.
- England L (2023) Rethinking creative freelancers and structures of care in cultural policy and organisational practice: A case study of Dundee during the Covid-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/10.1177/13678779231210883>
- Garduño B, Molina AE and Pertierra AC (2024) Public cultural institutions in Mexico and precarisation of creative labour. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/10.1177/13678779241245728>
- Han C (2018) Precarity, precariousness and vulnerability. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47: 331–343.
- Joffe A (2021) COVID-19 and the African cultural economy: An opportunity to reimagine and reinvigorate? *Cultural Trends* 30(1): 28–39.
- Khlystova O, Kalyuzhnova Y and Belitski M (2022) The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the creative industries: A literature review and future research agenda. *Journal of Business Research* 139: 1192–1210.
- Miller KM (2017) Toward a critical politics of precarity. *Sociology Compass* 11: e12483.
- Morgan G and Nelligan P (2018) *The Creativity Hoax: Precarious Work in the Gig Economy*. London: Anthem Press.
- Neilson B and Rossiter N (2008) Precarity as a political concept, or, Fordism as exception. *Theory, Culture, & Society* 25(7–8): 51–72.
- Quiña G (2023) Scenes of precarity: Conditions, dynamics and challenges for the post-pandemic future of cultural labour in Argentina. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/10.1177/13678779231195644>
- Ross A (2009) *Nice Work if You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times*. New York: New York University Press.

- Simon GI (2024) Ambivalence of informality: Covid-19 and unmasked precarity in Nollywood. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/10.1177/13678779231222029>
- Standing G (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.
- UNESCO (2020) *Culture in Crisis: Policy Guide for a Resilient Creative Sector*. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374631>
- Wolifson P, Gibson C, Brennan-Horley C, et al. (2023) Precarious work and precarious urban spaces: Divergent experiences of pandemic creativity. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/10.1177/13678779231217111>

## Author biographies

Anna Cristina Pertierra is an Associate Dean of Research in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at University of Technology Sydney, Australia. Regionally, her ethnographic work focuses on Cuba, Mexico and the Philippines, exploring consumption and material culture, urban modernities, media and popular culture. Her current project is a collaborative transnational study among formerly poor residents of four large cities in Asia and the Americas. Her publications include *Media Anthropology for the Digital Age* (Polity 2018); *Media Cultures in Latin America* (with Juan Francisco Salazar, Routledge 2020); and *Locating Television: Zones of Consumption* (with Graeme Turner, Routledge 2013).

Ahtziri E. Molina is a Doctor in Sociology and Director and researcher at the Centre for Arts Studies of the Universidad Veracruzana. She researches on the artistic community, cultural management, university extension, cultural policies, and cultural consumption. She is a member of the National System of Researchers of Mexico. Her most recent publications include *Arts in Emergency: Creation, Formation, and Survival of the Artistic Sector during the Pandemic* (with Elka Fediuk, Editorial del Lirio-Universidad Veracruzana, 2022); *Work Strategies Developed by Creative Workers in Mexico City: Enhanced Precarity and Adjustments During Pandemic Social Distancing Periods* (with Bianca Garduño, *European Journal of Cultural Management and Policy*, 2022). She served as president of the Mexican Universities Network of Cultural Management 2018–2022. Currently, she is president of the Latin American Network for Art Research.

Bianca Garduño is a Doctor in Social Sciences and an assistant professor at Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Perú. She has extensive research experience in higher education, cultural policies and cultural consumption. For the last three years, she has collaborated on the project New Consumer Cultures in the Global South with University of Technology Sydney. Her recent publications include *Work Strategies Developed by Creative Workers in Mexico City: Enhanced Precarity and Adjustments During Pandemic Social Distancing Periods* (with Ahtziri Molina, *European Journal of Cultural Management and Policy*, 2022); *Ensayo, error y reconfiguración: El trabajo creativo emergente durante la pandemia en la Ciudad de México* (with Ahtziri Molina, Artilugio, 2022); *Bailar y enseñar: La trayectoria académica de las profesoras y profesoras de danza en la Ciudad de México* (Revista de Investigación Teatral, 2022).